

[Review] Alan Liu (2008) Local transcendence: essays on postmodern historicism and the database

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Alan Liu, *Local Transcendence: Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 392 pp., £14.50 (paper), £37.00 (cloth)

'Keep cool but care' wrote Thomas Pynchon in his first novel, *V.*; an acknowledgment of the tension between the individual and the masses, an invitation to consider concepts of freedom and control, passion and apathy. It was also an invitation framed by the turbulence of an impending digital era, the 'flip' and 'flop' of these dichotomies corresponding to the zeros and ones of a 'computer's brain'.¹ Extending his previous work on Romanticism and – more obviously from this context – 'Cool', Alan Liu's latest collection is a volume that offers an insightful and much needed digital-era revision of cultural criticism since the 1980s, while also exhibiting a playful side in which the work frequently posits a structural counter-irony to the obverse line of thought. Containing an almost cartographic overview of Liu's work from 1989 to present – from the New Historicism to the Spruce Goose – *Local Transcendence* also provides, in its final two essays, 'Transcendental Data' and 'Escaping History', a solid rationale for an extension of such cultural criticism into the Digital Humanities projects of the last decade. In contrast to many essay collections amalgamating such spans of work, Liu's volume amounts, through the combination of cumulative argument and the constant structural plays on immanent transcendence, to more than the sum of its components; while this book has strong reference value it is

¹ Thomas Pynchon, *V.* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 366.

in the totality of its trajectory that it truly shines.

To begin with this in mind, it is perhaps apt to remark that the subtitle, 'Essays on Postmodern Historicism and the Database', appears, for much of a first reading, somewhat misplaced, for it is only in the final essay, 'Escaping History', in which Liu combines historiography with the database. Indeed, the early works in the collection – offering critique of, among others, the New Historicism's angst regarding 'the marginality of literary history' (p. 30) and Welsh colonial discourse in relation to Wordsworth, recusancy, patriotism and the New Historicist subversion/containment dichotomy – leave the reader with a sense of disjointedness and an impression of a *telos*-less wandering. However, it emerges that this is integral to the very performativity of Liu's writing; can one claim to have thoroughly covered, for example, the topic of anti-methodology in cultural criticism, if one's structural movement does not also query this model? Liu, it would seem, thinks not: his critique of lists takes the form of a list; his damnation of New Historicism's overemphasis on supposedly representative theatrical moments begins with a representative theatrical moment; the unacknowledged dangers of eXtensible Markup Language (XML) encoding for artistic practices are encoded within such a schema. While this could degenerate towards gimmickry, Liu pulls it off as a serious methodological undertaking, for mirrored in the synthetic resolution of these structural dialectics is a parallel to Liu's critique of 'that which the postmodern interpreter champions as subversive', the element which 'sympathizes with *ourselves*' (p. 62). In proposing, and then undermining, a structurally 'subversive' element, *Local Transcendence* sidesteps the pitfalls of methodological hypocrisy that lie in wait for such meta-textual performativity and reveals a distinct path.

This debate on form and content – so tired in other spheres – is further revived by Liu in his digital humanities work. In the penultimate piece, 'Transcendental Data', Liu argues that the increasing prevalence of content-transmission-consumption models (pp. 214-215) built upon standards such as XML, which *aim* to separate content from presentation, poses a threat to artistic modes that rely upon

the blurring of this distinction. Yet, is this pushing the implication of these technologies too far? After all, 95% of artists working in a digital medium are not currently exposed to XML, but rather constrained at the level of the user interfaces within which they must operate. The 5% who do encounter this medium will likely have the technical ability to craft a presentation layer – to borrow Marshall McLuhan's phrase – that would transform it to the message. While XML is, indeed, designed for presentational re-construction at the consumer-end, specifying procedures and constraints for this reception – and thereby circumventing the problem of which Liu writes – would be no different to the outcry at the Tate Modern when, in 2008, a Mark Rothko painting was accidentally hung, against the artist's instructions, upside down. Furthermore, it is possible that such a content/form dichotomy, in which each element must be separately considered, could lead to a culture of artistic practice which places a greater emphasis on the self-aware consideration of this distinction; surely a positive turn.

From this mention of auto-consciousness, it is fair to state that Liu's self-aware, self-criticism marks the strongest point in this volume. In knowledge of his earlier complicity with the New Historicism, Liu's work on Romanticism and, in particular, Wordsworth, wastes no time on preliminary synopsis and assumes a familiarity with the field, allowing his analysis of cultural criticism to shine through. When writing on the digital humanities, however, Liu digresses into lengthy exegeses of what are, to figures in the computer science arena, trivial aspects of database theory (p. 249-254). This discrepancy somewhat betrays Liu's objective to 'rethink thinking' (p. 181) as regards interdisciplinarity. Such an assumption of familiarity with the literary, and an opposing presumption of ignorance of the technological seems, at times, to recross the boundary of pragmatism back to a home discipline seeking 'some more absolute validation' (p. 181) in the exotic other.

These relatively minor critiques are outshone, however, by the majority of the book, none more so than in Liu's approach to the academy itself. Building on the premise that 'an adequate discussion of literary history must at some point cite the history of the academy' (p. 202), *Local Transcendence* is

topical and relevant, especially in its dealings with the already touched-upon interdisciplinary studies. Situating this term within the military metaphor aptly applied to disciplinarity, Liu covers the field with focus on the Fishean critique of epistemological boundaries, acquiescing to a degradation of the interdisciplinary to a mere rhetorical trope, yet simultaneously offering a means of redemption. In the recognition that interdisciplinarity is a mode whose quest for knowledge risks a fall towards this rhetorical formation, Liu sees the potential for a counterforce who, re-appropriating Lyotard, would deny the 'consensus of good taste'; a war machine that reverts to a Deleuzian horde, rather than a monolithic entity (pp. 184-185). Similarly, the discussion on literary history as the management of presentations of literature – while having a Wittgensteinian feel to its motif of 'citation-as-seeing' as opposed to 'citation-as-calling' (p. 196) – also has a role in the practicalities of course design and pedagogy. Although Liu lacks the space, or perhaps inclination, to develop this into a full pragmatic paradigm, it is hinted that while the academy's current mode may permit plurality within its meta-structure, a move to a new literary history would involve – couched by Liu in the terminology of packet switching and, even, patchwork quilting – less credulity towards these meta-narratives.

From this description, one might be tempted to believe that *Local Transcendence* has scarcely advanced since the heyday of high postmodernism; be assured that this is not the case. While in both structure and content Liu explores the bounds of knowledge that so pervaded this era, this collection is an entirely historicized account of the period which covers, ultimately, the unacknowledged tension between contingency and freedom, between the academy and its objects of study, between digital threat and digital redemption within the discourses of postmodern historiography.